Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* by Cameron Awkward-Rich (Duke University Press)

by Claudia Schippert | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT Simultaneously a project of metacritical reflections about disciplinary foundations at the intersections of the academic fields of transgender studies, disability studies, and Black feminist studies, and a series of close readings of cultural texts and artifacts central to those disciplinary developments, Awkward-Rich's book is intellectually generous, beautifully written, and deftly argued. Critically investigating the production of disability and transgender theories, forged interdependently and through distancing trans authority from the specter of madness and disability, *The Terrible We* traces conflicts among trans, queer, and feminist perspectives in closely reading foundational texts and cultural contexts. It presents an invitation to consider forms of maladjustment a productive resource rather than an impediment to trans life, thought, and creativity.

KEYWORDS Black feminism, disability studies, queer, theory, trans studies

The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment. By Cameron Awkward-Rich. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 2086pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478018681. US List: $24.95

One might not expect a book about bad feelings and mad habits to be a joy to read, but *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* is beautifully written and important. It is also a powerful and challenging intervention in the disciplinary self-understanding of trans studies, tracing developments from the celebration of public authority granted to some trans voices in the 2010s to the more recent return to transantagonistic public struggles. Awkward-Rich is writing

critically from the middle of a disciplinary field about the very founding of the field, at once relying on and simultaneously raising difficult questions about the "we" that constitutes trans studies.

Taking up the challenge of navigating antagonistic or phobic projections at the very foundation of one's (disciplinary) identity, Awkward-Rich is unflinching in his genealogical work confronting critical issues in the foundation of trans-studies; and he is generous in extending invitations to rethink foundational moments and theoretical moves, including the attendant disavowals and exclusions that created trans studies as a disciplinary field that distanced itself from disability and madness.

The main argument that informs the nuanced chapters is that "rather than only impeding or confining trans life, thought, and creativity, forms of maladjustment have also been central to their development" (17). *The Terrible We* further develops this claim through four chapters, an interlude reflecting on a set of artworks, and an afterword/elegy.

The first chapter, "Disabled Histories of *Trans,*" explores how the categories of disabled and transgender coemerged by chronicling the popular newspaper discourse about three transmasculine persons. The first, Evelyn "Jackie" Bross, was arrested in 1943 in Chicago for her masculine dress and haircut at a time in the United States when gender roles were shifting and crossdressing laws were being revised. When the judge ordered Bross confined in a psychiatric facility, the decision resembled an increasing number of cases in which those who did not fit gender or sexual norms were sent to the asylum, placing the production of gender nonconformity and disability in the same physical and disciplinary location, governed by broad assumptions of incapacity and expressions of disciplinary confinement as care. The second, Milton B. Mason, was arrested in 1895 for obtaining money under false pretenses (his gender nonconformity serving as ground for deception). Mason ended up exhibiting himself as a freak, performing

an exaggerated version of white transness in dime museums, where the dramatic staging of "human anomalies" was (co-)producing public displays of gender deviance and racial otherness within widely popular entertainment venues, in an era before the medical model of disability would increasingly reposition human variation as the object of medical science and individual pathology to be cured. Thirdly, Awkward-Rich discusses the unique history of Jack Bee Garland's "Disability Drag" at the turn of the twentieth century as an example of a momentary authorization of bodies marked as otherwise gender nonconforming and female-assigned. Refusing gender assignment in public debates, Garland passed as disabled, claiming an inability to speak. Garland was able to work the connection of trans and disability to their own ends, successfully asserting their transgender authority—which, as Awkward-Rich clarifies, was connected to elements of educational privilege and proximity to whiteness. The chapter ends with insightful comments about contemporary debates about crip/trans solidarity as complicated or risky. Engaging different perspectives of the "drama that produced the ADA's definition of gender variance as impairment but not protectable disability"(56), Awkward-Rich closes the chapter with the provocative suggestion that instead of continuing to attempt to disentangle transness on the one hand and forms of insanity or absurdity on the other hand (with the aim of resisting the equation of the two), "might insanity, tragedy, and absurdity be integral, rather than only inimical, to trans life and thought? What might we learn by thinking with, rather than against, the madness and maladjustment that is everywhere evident in trans-antagonistic and trans-affirmative archives alike?" (59).

The interlude between the first and second chapter, "Holding Space," explores Dylan Scholinski's 2013 performance installation that negotiates carceral and psychiatric spaces and the memories from within them. Here, Awkward-Rich helpfully clarifies the complex project of his book: "*The Terrible We* is not a disability studies approach to transness, nor is it a book *about* the overlapping experiences of transness and disability/madness, though it insists on that overlap.

Rather, it is a book that attempts to hold on to certain tools from disability studies—among other fields—in order to open trans studies itself up to different critical protocols. It is the record of my attempt to read with the forms of madness, distress, and maladjustment that are already endemic to transliterature and thought, to understand what they have enabled and might yet" (65).

Chapter 2, "Trans, Feminism; Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual," engages the often taken-for-granted incompatibility of trans and feminist theories of gender. Rather than building a theory of gender that can avoid epistemological roadblocks or bad feelings, Awkward-Rich argues for "living with the lack of trans feminist integration, even though it does not feel good." Intervening in the conflicts at the intersections of feminist and trans studies, chapter 3, "Some Dissociative Trans Masc Poetics," takes on the challenge of not eliding the connection of sexual violence and trans identity, which is often suppressed in order to foreground healthy trans-subjectivity. Focusing on transmasculine literary and cultural accounts such as the Brandon Teena archive and Elliott DeLine's fiction, Awkward-Rich advocates for "the centrality of something like a dissociative poetics to transmasculine writing and thought" (28). For example, in DeLine's *Refuse*, the narrator does not attempt to join or heal an existing split in their character or personality but, instead, "DeLine uses the autofiction form to further multiply himself through splitting" (108). Further fracturing the narrative, DeLine's narrator Dean continuously refuses coherence, and the narrative ends up quite frustrating to read in its persistent failure to produce integration of disparate aspects of self. Awkward-Rich suggests that "Dean . . . occupies the theoretically overburdened territories of queer gender and much of the project of *Refuse* is charting how it feels—in DeLine's time and place—to do so" (110).

Chapter 4, "We's Company," turns to the potentially helpful aspects of "the trans recluse." Rather than the overdetermined "properly extroverted" model of publicly validated trans authority, this chapter moves toward other forms of sociality, exploring the life story of Michael Dillon as a mid-twentieth-century tale of trans

subjectivity grounded in reclusion and social anxiety more than the normative story of progressive emergence into (open and out) trans subjectivity.

An “Afterword/Elegy” juxtaposes the pop cultural promise of a “transgender tipping point” of visibility in 2014 or 2015 with the reemergence of transantagonistic legislation and challenges to trans lives around the time of publication in 2022. The book’s final pages speak to painful conflicts and juxtapositions of trans lives represented and self-represented, often through stories or notes of suicide or the narratives of victims of violence. Like the book in its entirety, Awkward-Rich remains unflinchingly committed to thinking through the conflicted perceptions about and amidst “sad and ugly” feelings and complex forms of maladjustment.

Honest, patient, and calling the reader to critically revisit how the splitting of trans from madness and disability has robbed trans discourse of important history and also depth, *The Terrible We* is a challenging and very much necessary book relevant to several intersecting constituencies and academic disciplines.

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Article details

Claudia Schippert, "Review of *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* by Cameron Awkward-Rich (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 12.2 (2023).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.2.XX

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053